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Growing strength of Syria's Islamist groups undermines hopes of ousting Assad

The west is being forced to rethink its support for rebel alliance in civil war as forces linked to al-Qaida gain ground

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Rebel fighters in clashes with pro-government forces in the northern city of Aleppo. Photograph: Medo Halab/Getty

The Bab al-Hawa crossing post sits under a low ridge on the Syrian-Turkish border, not far from the Turkish town of Reyhanli. There is a concrete canopy and a handful of buildings. It is important because of what lies not far away in the village of Babisqa – one of the main storage depots for the supreme military council of the Free Syrian Army including weapons and other equipment.

In the Syrian conflict, who controls crossings like Bab al-Hawa and depots like Babisqa is crucially important.

On the evening of 6 December, a series of events began, with ramifications threatening

to be far-reaching. They point to a development many observers have been fearing: a dangerous new fracture opening within the fragmented ranks of Syria's opposition fighters, which threatens to pit the FSA against a powerful Islamist coalition. The ideological frontiers on the map of Syria's civil conflict are shifting.

Accounts are confused and contradictory. But according to one version, members of a powerful new alliance of Islamist groups – the Islamic Front, which includes among its seven core groups some which in the past have co-operated with the al-Qaida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra – took control of the warehouses at gunpoint, claiming they were defending them from an attack, and later the Bab al-Hawa crossing.

Within days, the US and the UK announced they had "suspended" all deliveries of non-lethal materials to the supreme military council through Turkey, which has included sophisticated communications equipment. Although the FSA's chief of staff, Salim Idris, and his aides have in recent days tried to play down the incident – claiming the warehouses were taken in agreement with him, and denying reports that he had fled the country – the events mark a worrying new turn in the conflict. "The situation in the north of Syria now is very complicated and very dangerous, because there are some problems between some groups, and I think we should try everything now to find a solution for this problem," Idris said last week.

His comments follow an earlier warning he delivered last month to the US broadcaster PBS, when he accused jihadi groups of "fighting against" the Free Syrian Army. "They are trying to control the territories, which we liberated before. And they don't fight against the regime. And they are, for us, very dangerous and may be sometimes more dangerous than the regime." And dangerous not simply because of their ambitions, but because the new Islamic Front can now muster about 45,000 fighters under arms, three times as many as the FSA. In a conflict in which the tide has been turning in recent months in favour of Bashar al-Assad and his main ally on the ground, the Lebanese Hezbollah movement, the balance of power has been shifting also among opposition groups, increasingly in favour of well-armed Islamist groups, some allied to al-Qaida and supplied by wealthy donors in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, at the expense of the FSA.

The shift in the balance of power comes amid warnings from counter-terrorism experts that the two main al-Qaida-affiliated groups – Jabhat al-Nusra and the rival Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Isis) – are now better established in Syria and pose a greater threat than al-Qaida in Iraq at the height of its strength there in 2006-07. Writing recently in the journal of the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, Brian Fishman argued: "Jabhat al-Nusra and the Isis have more safe havens than [al-Qaida] ever had in Iraq. The Syrian military has been denied access to vast swaths of Syria for months ... Those safe havens mean that [the two groups] can mitigate their ideological extremism

through better training, and foreign fighters can be vetted and trained more thoroughly because they are less of a security hazard than foreign fighters were in Iraq."

If the al-Qaida affiliates are better established and stronger than they were in Iraq, he argues, it is because they are not only not under pressure from a large US military presence, but because they also have learned from at least some of the mistakes they made in Iraq, where they alienated much of the population.

Equally concerning for diplomats pushing for progress at next month's Geneva II conference is that the alphabet soup of rival groups and individual brigades competing for territory and influence is making it ever harder to achieve consensus, not least because some Islamist groups have already rejected the peace conference. It is not simply a question of the shifting fortunes for individual groups, as Fishman and other analysts have pointed out – their agendas also differ. While Jabhat al-Nusra is at the forefront of the fight against the Assad regime, Isis – analysts and rivals claim – has been more interested in consolidating its grip on territory it controls and establishing its own forms of governance.

The formation last month of the Islamic Front, a grouping that – on paper at least – has united tens of thousands of fighters from some of Syria's most powerful Islamist groups,, including Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, the Islamic Army and the Tawhid Brigade, has inevitably provoked suggestions that its emergence has undermined the authority and influence of the FSA. Although, officially, British and US diplomats were insisting last week that the FSA – and Idris – were still the key force to be reckoned with, there were increasing indications that behind the scenes in Washington there is pressure to recognise the changing circumstances on the ground.

At one end of the spectrum has been the remarks of those like former diplomat Ryan Crocker, who has served in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, to the *Washington Post*, insisting that the US will need to deal with Assad. "We need to start talking to the Assad regime again" about counter-terrorism and other issues of shared concern, the paper reported Crocker saying, adding: "It will have to be done very, very quietly. But bad as Assad is, he is not as bad as the jihadis who would take over in his absence."

What is already happening, according to some accounts, is discreet talks with some more moderate groups in the Islamic Front, which reportedly took place in Turkey, headed by US envoy Robert Ford, who travelled to London on Friday to consult with other western backers of the Syrian opposition, including the UK.

In a further development yesterday – underlining the rapidly changing dynamics of the conflict – a rebel commander with the Islamic Front told Reuters they would be talking with US officials in Turkey this week, perhaps including Ford, to seek an agreement on

arms supply and co-ordination in areas controlled by the front. That followed an announcement on Friday in London that the Islamic Front would be invited to join the opposition delegation to the Geneva talks.

Among those sceptical about the continuing UK policy of backing the FSA as the key representative of the opposition is Jane Kinninmont of the foreign policy thinktank Chatham House. "I speak to people who say the role of the jihadis is exaggerated because of their strategy of capturing areas close to the borders to control arms and supplies, and who say the FSA is still stronger deeper inside the country. But the latest news is a bad sign. You get the sense that the UK in particular is in a bit of a bind about having backed the FSA so strongly."

She argues that a number of other factors are converging at the same time that will make the peace conference ever more difficult, including the fury of Saudi Arabia over the recent US nuclear deal with Iran. "Assad is making advances, he has presented himself as a partner with the west in getting rid of his chemical weapons, and is promising elections. With the rising concern over the Islamist factions, and no prospect of outside military intervention, the levers that could be used to remove him are disappearing."



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